

People & Events

"Kristallnacht"

On the night of November 9, 1938, the sounds of breaking glass shattered the air in cities throughout Germany and parts of Austria while fires across the countries devoured synagogues and Jewish institutions. By the end of the rampage, gangs of Nazi storm troopers had destroyed 7,000 Jewish businesses, set fire to more than 900 synagogues, killed 91 Jews and deported some 30,000 Jewish men to concentration camps. In a report back to the State Department a few days later, a U.S official in Leipzig described what he saw of the atrocities. "Having demolished dwellings and hurled most of the moveable effects to the streets," he wrote, "the insatiably sadistic perpetrators threw many of the trembling inmates into a small stream that flows through the zoological park, commanding horrified spectators to spit at them, defile them with mud and jeer at their plight."



An incident several days earlier had given the Nazi authorities an excuse to instigate the violence. On November 7th, a 17-year-old Polish Jewish student named Hershel Grynszpan had shot Ernst vom Rath, the Third Secretary of the German Embassy in Paris. Grynszpan, enraged by the deportation of his parents to Poland from Hanover, Germany, where they had lived since 1914, hoped that his dramatic action would alert the world to the ominous plight of Europe's Jews. When the French police arrested Grynszpan, he sobbed: "Being a Jew is not a crime. I am not a dog. I have a right to live and the Jewish people have a right to exist on earth. Wherever I have been I have been chased like an animal." The assassination attempt was successful; vom Rath died on November 9th.

News of the Third Secretary's death reached the leading figures of the Nazi party later that day while they were attending a dinner in Munich. Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels delivered an inflammatory speech, urging the assembled crowd to take to the streets. The message was clear: The German Jews would have to pay for vom Rath's death. Later that night Reinhard Heydrich, the head of the Security Service, sent a series of orders to all State Police offices: Business establishments and homes of Jews could be destroyed but not looted; German life and property should not be jeopardized; and as soon as the events of the night permitted, officers should arrest as many Jews, particularly wealthy ones, as the local jails would hold.

The following day Goebbels announced, "We shed not a tear for them [the Jews.]" He went on to comment on the destruction of synagogues saying, "They stood in the way long enough. We can use the space made free more usefully than as Jewish fortresses."

"Kristallnacht" provided the Nazi government with an opportunity at last to totally remove Jews from German public life. It was the culminating event in a series of anti-Semitic policies set in place since Hitler took power in 1933. Within a week, the Nazis had circulated a letter declaring that Jewish businesses could not be reopened unless they were to be managed by non-Jews. On November 15th, Jewish children were barred from attending school, and shortly afterwards the Nazis issued the "Decree on Eliminating the Jews from German Economic Life," which prohibited Jews from selling goods or services anywhere, from engaging in crafts work, from serving as the

managers of any firms, and from being members of cooperatives. In addition, the Nazis determined that the Jews should be liable for the damages caused during "Kristallnacht." "The Decree on the Penalty Payment by Jews Who Are German Subjects" also imposed a one-billion mark fine on the Jewish community, supposedly an indemnity for the death of vom Rath.

Although the atrocities perpetrated during the Night of Broken Glass did arouse outrage in Western Europe and the United States, little concrete action was taken to help the German Jews. At a press conference on November 15th, President Roosevelt said, "The news of the past few days from Germany has deeply shocked public opinion in the United States... I myself could scarcely believe that such things could occur in a 20th century civilization." The president also instructed that the 12,000-15,000 refugees already in the U.S. on temporary visitor visas could remain in the country indefinitely.

Broken Glass: Kristallnacht

By Writer38942849, Aiken, SC

Journal Entry #2
November 9, 1943

Its name was Kristallnacht. What they had done to us even had a name which would come to be known as the Night of Broken Glass. The soldiers marched through our town wrecking everything in sight. The ground was covered in shattered bits of glass, with a river of crimson blood. Businesses and other buildings ceased to exist. All that remained of them were the shattered remains and the memories it brought the people of our town. These buildings included my family's bakery and the fabric shop of my friend Emily's family. As we looked around at the tattered remains of our old lives, a thick blanket of smoke filled the air as it coated our lungs. You would think this was the worst of it but we learned that the worst had yet to come. We saw no reason to lie to ourselves anymore. There was nothing left here in this little town of ours. We were out of hope and out of time. All we could do was pray and hope for the best.

As I try to crouch under a table in the bakery, the soldiers continued to destroy the buildings until they come to the fabric shop. This was the same fabric shop that belongs to Emily's family. Without hesitation, they knock out the windows with their rifles, coating the ground in shatters and bits of broken glass. I could see the reflection of my friend and her family's reactions in a small bit of shattered glass. Emily sat on the shop floor surrounded by the beautiful fabrics as they held each other and wept. It reminded me of the days when Emily and I would play as we wandered around the fabric shop. What I wouldn't give to go back to the days before those of broken glass.



Image Credit: Laura M., Eagan, MN

The author's comments:

“ This started out as an English assignment and when my friends read it and liked it, I turned it into a memoir of the holocaust told from five or so different people from journal entries. So this is the second journal entry and I hope you like it. :)

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You would think it would have been enough for them. Having already destroyed most of the town and destroying everything of value to us, there was nothing left to take. They had to kill our loved ones, separate us from our families, and now destroying the places we grew up in and came to love. They would just be destroying our homes, businesses, buildings, and schools as if they were just meant to be destroyed, as if we weren't there crying and watching our lives tumbling down before us. All they cared about were themselves. We were nothing to them or anyone else. We were nothing but outsiders on the borders and brinks looking in at our old lives. There was one thing the soldiers couldn't take away from us though. They couldn't take away our memories. They couldn't take away my memory of playing in the

fabric shop with Emily or my first day of school. Those memories are the things the soldiers could never take away.